

# **Clarendon County Regular Council Meeting**

## **Monday, April 27, 2020**

### **6:00 PM**

### **County Council Chambers**

#### **Those in attendance:**

Chairman Dwight L. Stewart, Jr.  
Councilman Billy G. Richardson  
Councilman Benton Blakely  
Clerk to Council, Dorothy M. Levy

Vice Chairman W.J. Frierson  
Councilman A.C. English  
County Administrator, David W. Epperson

#### **Press in attendance:** None

#### **Others in attendance included:**

Lynden Anthony              Ted Felder              Meesha Witherspoon              David Hilton

Chairman Stewart called the meeting to order at 6:00 pm. He stated that this would be our first meeting on Facebook Live. Vice Chairman Frierson led the invocation. The Pledge of Allegiance was recited in unison.

#### **1. Approval of the Agenda**

On motion by Councilman Richardson and Seconded by Councilman Blakely, Council voted Unanimous Approval to the agenda for April 27, 2020.

#### **2. Approval of Minutes**

On motion by Councilman English and Seconded by Councilman Richardson, Council voted Unanimous Approval to the council meeting minutes for the Regular Council Meeting, which was held on Monday, March 9, 2020.

On motion by Councilman Blakely and Seconded by Vice Chairman Frierson, Council voted Unanimous Approval to the council meeting minutes for the Special Called Council Meeting, which was held on Thursday, March 18, 2020.

#### **3. Fair Housing Resolution**

Administrator Epperson read in the minutes a Resolution declaring the month of May as Fair Housing Month.

On motion by Councilman Richardson and Seconded by Vice Chairman Frierson, Council voted Unanimous Approval declaring the month of May as Fair Housing Month in Clarendon County.

#### **4. Financial Report**

Mr. Lynden Anthony, CFO, began his report by stating the following:

- **The General Fund** had Expenditures of \$1,960,459 and Revenue of \$1,128,485 as of March 31, 2020.

- **Weldon Auditorium** had Revenue of \$13,083 the month ending March 31, 2020 and total Expenses were \$89,954. He stated that the Weldon Auditorium ended the month of March 2020 after transfers with a Zero balance.
- **Water and Sewer Department** had Operating Revenue of \$683,809 and Operating Expenses of \$440,030 of March 31, 2020. He stated that after depreciation and Bond interest expense, Interest Income, and Grant Revenue, the Water and Sewer Department had Net Utility Loss of \$35,672.
- **The C-Fund Program** for the month of March 2020 had a Cash Balance of \$2,050,482 of which \$1,890,907 has been committed to remaining local paving projects, State Construction Projects in Progress and State Proviso Funds. He stated that the C-Fund Program had an Uncommitted Balance of \$159,575 as of the end of March 2020.

## 5. Administrator's Report

Administrator Epperson began his report by giving Council the following updates:

I have to first say on behalf of the citizens of Clarendon County and our County Employees how much we appreciate the County Council support and our County's Mayors' backing as we have gone through what has been an unprecedented time in our history. Along with the entire nation, we have been doing all that we can to maneuver through this public health crisis in the form of the COVID-19 virus.

Having said that, we have not had the good results for which we were hoping so far, and I intend to lay out for you tonight why we think that is the case, what we are doing about it now, and what may have to be done in the near future if things don't start getting better.

First, I want to present the latest statistics. As of this evening, Clarendon County has had confirmed by the South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control (DHEC) one hundred eighty-five (185) total cases of the virus and we have witnessed the deaths of fourteen (14) of our citizens. When you break it down to the last fourteen (14) days, the picture gets even worse. We currently have over ninety-eight (98) active cases, which means that we have more than many larger counties including Charleston and Horry Counties.

You may have heard that Gov. Henry McMaster has extended the state's stay-at-home order to May 15, 2020. Over the last two months, he has released a series of these Executive Orders which have had at their core an emphasis that everyone in South Carolina should either be "at work or at home". As you know, the Governor in one of his latest orders took a step that appeared to be the first one back towards a potential "re-opening" of services. While that may be appropriate for some businesses, counties and regions in the Palmetto State, we are nowhere close to that point here. Unfortunately, it does not appear that everyone in our County understands the meaning, importance or consequences that are connected to staying at home and social distancing. As you just heard, the numbers show that we are very much a "hot spot" for the spread of COVID-19, which means that more needs to be done to get the proper information out to everyone before we can start thinking of a reopening.

Under direction from Council through the emergency ordinance passed in March, I have taken several steps that were necessary to protect the public, the County Employees and the County itself, while closely following the directions and recommended course of action from our regulatory officials at the state level. The thrust of these steps is to do what we can to slow the spread of the virus until we learn more about how to deal with it. We know that we will never be in a world without it ever again and that the long-term solution is finding a way to live with it safely as we do the flu, the common cold and other viruses. These steps are as follows:

1. All county buildings have been closed to the public and all non-essential offices are closed.
2. All county parks and recreation facilities are closed to include the boat ramp at Taw Caw Park.
3. All events at Weldon Auditorium are canceled through May 31, 2020. All other programs, to include Baseball and Softball, continue to be postponed through May 31, 2020. On May 8<sup>th</sup>, a decision will be made on the future of all programs and activities through August 31, 2020.

One of the possibilities we have discussed is to hold a special “Fall Baseball” season involving games during the week, a flag football season in Turbeville with games on Saturdays, and a soccer season in Manning with games on Saturdays. There will be no “tackle” football this year. When baseball returns to its normal home in the spring of 2021, we will be able to adjust the fall programs accordingly.

4. The City of Manning has implemented a curfew that went into effect on April 2 for each night from 10:00 PM through 6:00 AM. We haven’t done that yet of course, but we may have to consider it at some point if things don’t get better.

As you would expect, we have really been focused on figuring out why we are having such a problem with the virus where other counties of similar size and demographics are not. If there was an easy answer to this, I would address it but truthfully there are several contributing factors:

1. We have the first “fast food” exit heading south on I-95 after Florence and we get many visitors to our restaurants and gas stations from other parts of the country. Unlike other counties with fast food exits on 95, we have that large mileage gap which I believe contributes to the number of cars we see at our exit;
2. We have Lake Marion and many boat landings which I discussed earlier. I cannot keep folks who don’t live here from coming to their homes on the lake, but we can close the public landings which I mentioned earlier;
3. Our nursing homes and special needs facilities have found themselves hot spots within the larger County hot spot itself. Although I believe DHEC is working with us in good faith, I have been very frustrated with the way they are handling nursing homes and information about the COVID-19 cases within these facilities. In many cases, we are having to really press to get the most basic details and tidbits of information from them. I have asked our Emergency Management Director to continue communicate with them to get us the information we need to protect our workers and the facilities’ residents.

As you know, one of the big problems with this particular pandemic is non-symptomatic individuals carrying the virus without even knowing they are doing it. So, it’s very possible for a County Emergency worker to come in contact with an individual who has the virus without knowing it, and if they don’t show any symptoms for a couple of weeks, they have then become a carrier. Also, the staffs at these facilities may have the virus without knowing it if they are not being tested, and they could be placing the virus inside with the residents. Early in the process, we were told that a lack of testing was contributing to this problem, which may have been the case then. But the testing capabilities are there now to help prevent such problems and we’re not seeing the results we should be. It’s not what I want to be saying, but it is clear that we do have a unique problem here in Clarendon County which requires we do more as quickly as possible.

As I mentioned earlier, when a small and rural county like ours has more active cases of COVID-19 than Charleston, Horry, Kershaw and Sumter Counties, it’s not merely an anomaly to be ignored. Those are the three major items that I believe are currently contributing to our increasing numbers. Other factors helped get the virus rolling here of course, but these are the ones keeping it going.

Now I can assure you that I understand the problems this situation has caused for our local economy, and we as a staff have used every tool available to try and help where we can without endangering the public. For example:

1. We have tried for all services to be accessed via the telephone and by email.
2. We have waived as many fees as possible to help encourage folks to use these options.
3. For those services that just absolutely require a visit to the office, we have utilized appointment only protocols including strict limits and 100% social distancing to get the job done. We are rotating individual staffers in those departments while keeping them safe.
4. We have pushed information out to the public about this situation. I have released numerous memoranda, asked our Public Relations and IT Departments to keep our Social Media and Webpages active and we even

have a webpage specifically devoted to public information about COVID-19. They have done a great job and have done everything they have been asked to do.

5. Chairman Stewart and the Mayors have coordinated together for two public releases themselves, and we intend to reach out to the Census Committee and Faith Based organizations to help us distribute public information materials we received from the South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control (DHEC). They have provided us materials including post cards, palm cards, a video, a poster and several social media links to get the word out. **The bottom line is that no one should leave their homes unless it is absolutely necessary.**

Unfortunately, as I eluded to earlier, it doesn't appear that the collective work we have done to this point has been enough. Based on this, I have taken some new steps this evening for your consideration:

1. I have asked Meesha Witherspoon to ramp up our public information efforts for the County. She is being asked to work with all of the entities mentioned in in this report and others to make sure every citizen and business in this county understands how important it is that we all must work as a team if we are going to get through this epidemic. As an initial example, she is going to put together a flyer to be put in everyone's water bills that will go out later this week that plainly explains the risks of not following the guidelines on social behavior and personal interaction with others. She will also be reaching out to various community leaders to have them do video messages to make folks start tuning into just how dangerous this situation is, and maybe changing their behavior;
2. I will be asking our public safety and law enforcement officials to enhance their enforcement of social distancing rules and break up groups of more than three people in public areas. I have been pleased to see the efforts that individual stores have made such as keeping distance between customers, special senior hours and limits on the total patrons inside at one time, and if we increase enforcement on the public safety side, our situation may improve significantly;
3. We are asking the Governor's Office to let individual counties decide what steps and timeframes are appropriate for discussions of reopening the local economies. It should not be a "one size fits all" situation. I understand that many areas in the state aren't looking at the same circumstances we are and that's why it is crucial that we be allowed to make those decisions for ourselves;
4. I have directed our Emergency Management team to constantly pressure DHEC to change their approaches when it comes to getting us the information we need, especially when it comes to the nursing homes and the special needs facilities. As an attorney, I understand the importance of protecting privacy, but we are talking about an unprecedented public health crisis;
5. When we do start coming back to work, we will be instituting internal protocols for staff to follow. These protocols will include required social distancing continuing to be followed, an emphasis on inter-office communications being completed by email, fax and phone whenever possible and usage of mailboxes for delivery of items that must be signed going back and forth between departments. We also will implement any reopening plan in a "staged" format, meaning that staff rotations and public entry into the buildings will be limited and staggered at first. Also, we are in the process of installing permanent separations within departments that deal with the public most often to protect everyone involved.

I do not like being the bearer of negative news, and I understand that some of what I have been discussing may give you pause. I also understand that we are going to be dealing with this virus for a long time to come even under ideal results. Having said that, until we have a better understanding of exactly what we are dealing with, or until we start seeing a consistent reduction in case numbers and deaths in our County, we must do everything we can to protect our citizens. We have to take the above-described actions ourselves, and the best weapon we have is public awareness and education.

This time in our history will pass and eventually we will get back to a "normal" time, although the definition of normal may have been changed forever.

- Councilman Richardson asked how are they handling building permits
- Administrator Epperson replied by stating that the Planning Commission is back in the office catching up on the back log and citizens can call the Planning Commission or send them an email and they will respond back to them.

## 6. Chairman's Report

Chairman Stewart began his report stating that he agrees with Administrator Epperson that we have to get this under control. He said that it's tough on small businesses and tough on large businesses. Chairman Stewart continued by stating that it seems like the elderly are more susceptible to the virus. He said that we have to do all that we can to keep everyone safe.

- Councilman Blakely said that we are lucky to have a wonderful group of hardworking people as our First Responders.
- Administrator Epperson said that he wants to thank our First Responders for putting their lives and the lives of their families on the line to help keep us safe. He continued by stating that we have to continue practice social distancing, washing hands, and using hand sanitizer as often as possible.
- Chairman Stewart thanked Meesha Witherspoon for keeping all of us informed.

Chairman Stewart concluded his presentation by stating that he attended several Zoom meetings and he thinks the Zoom meetings would continue after this crisis is gone.

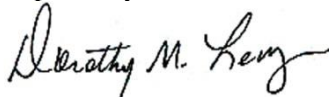
## 7. Adjourn

Chairman Stewart stated that we have exhausted our agenda and he asked for a motion to adjourn the Council Meeting.

On motion by Councilman Blakely and Seconded by Councilman Richardson, Council voted Unanimous Approval to adjourn the Council Meeting.

The Council Meeting adjourned at 6:37 pm.

Respectfully Submitted,



Dorothy M. Levy  
Clerk to Clarendon County Council, CCC

